DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 639 HE 033 648

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TITLE Integration of the Freshman Seminar into Introductory Psychology Classes.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology (11th, Ellenville, NY, March 19-21, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *College Freshmen; Higher Education; *Psychology; Student Surveys; *Transitional Programs

ABSTRACT

This paper describes and evaluates a program designed to help first-year students make the transition from high school to college, first through a description by a teacher using this program in a class for freshmen and then through responses to a survey about the experience completed by some freshmen who had participated. Classes in the program, taught in the context of a Life-span development class, are kept small, and smaller groups are formed to explore one of four themes such as gender issues or cognitive development in discussion groups. Students are given assistance in developing academic skills, learning about university resources, and developing connections to the larger university. Developing a connection between course material and the real life context and developing active and critical thinking are also encouraged. Student surveys and a review of students' academic achievement show that students in the First Year Experience (FYE) program were more likely to get help with study and test-taking skills and were more likely to say that they had developed a close relationship with a faculty member and understood the demands college was making of them. The FYE course was planned as a requirement for all freshmen in fall 1998. (SLD)

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Proceedings on the Eleventh Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology
(Ellenville, New York, March 19-21, 1997)

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Integration of the Freshman Seminar into Introductory Psychology Courses

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An increasing number of institutions have recognized the need for programs designed to help first-year students (freshmen) make the transition from high school to college. The changes in expectations and responsibilities and the adjustment to living away from home may be overwhelming to these students, particularly those whose parents did not attend college. These first-generation college students are often uneasy and ambivalent about going away to the university. Recent studies of first-generation freshmen show that they come to college with lower test scores, attain lower GPAs and are more likely to drop out during their first year. Many regional public institutions, such as our own, have entering classes that contain a large percentage of these first-generation students.

In response to this need, transitional programs of every variety have been developed for college campuses. The most typical model offers a stand-alone freshman seminar or college success course. For a variety of reasons, this may not always be an option. At our university, a different model was developed three years ago by a team of academic and student affairs personnel. During the Fall semester of 1994, we began a pilot program for our new students that integrated freshman seminar topics into regular academic courses which fulfill general education requirements. The results continue to be very encouraging as we now enter our third year of the program, with an expanding group of faculty involved. The program will become a requirement for all first year students as of fall semester 1998.

Many different disciplines have been involved in this program, ranging from English composition to Political science to Chemistry. However, the psychology courses, including both Introductory Psychology and Lifespan Development, provide a unique opportunity both for freshman students to examine their experiences in this transition in their lives and for infusion of material relevant to their transition to college.

The first author of this presentation will describe her use of this program in a Life-span development course taught only for freshmen. The freshman year is a particularly stressful time as students adjust from high school and family life to college expectations and semi-independent living with new people. Therefore it is a particularly good time for students to examine their own lives in the context of this major life change and perhaps gain new insights from studying new ways of looking at their lives. In order to help students make the transition from high school to college, the following areas were felt to be most important: 1. developing a support group 2. developing academic skills necessary for success 3. making the students aware of the resources available at the university 4. developing a connection to the larger university community: e.g., sports, service, the arts, clubs. 5. developing a connection between class material and the rest of the students' lives 6. developing active and critical thinking. The lifespan course can be particularly helpful in giving students a chance to look backward and forward at their own lives in this time of transition.

Developing a support group. Classes in this program are kept relatively small, no more than 25. Within the Life-span development class, smaller groups are formed based on each students choice of one of four "themes" that they will pursue in their

written assignments through the semester, such as gender issues, the individual in the family, or cognitive development. These small groups then become regular discussion groups for topics to be discussed in class and may also become study groups outside of the classroom. Students are encouraged to exchange phone numbers and call each other with questions, etc. These groups often do form a basis for new friendships and support during this time. As one student wrote in her evaluation, "I met new people because of our groups that I can say hi to when we walk by one another. Maybe if I become a teacher I will consider grouping so (students) get o know one another". Another student reported, "This class helped me realize that I was not alone in my struggle to get used to my first semester in college".

Developing academic skills. Within the context of an assignment to examine two journal articles and report on the hypothesis and methodology in them, students are given a library tour with instruction in using Psych Lit to find the articles they need. Including a hands-on experience with the library computer system goes a long way toward alleviating fears about how to use this technology and do a search. In addition, while studying middle childhood and information processing, students are given an assessment of their academic skills with advice for improving their areas of weakness. Special films, such as the "your college experience" series, put out by South Carolina ETV have been effective at raising issues about study skills for discussion in class. Finally, attribution theory has been introduced in the context of how they interpret the results of their first exam and how they plan to do better on the second exam.(See examples on attached pages) For example, one student stated "When I study I get distracted very easily. I will from now on go into the dorm basement to study. There is no noise. Also, I will read for a little and then get up and stretch then go back to work"Feedback from students in regard to this aspect of the program include the following statements: "I will take my study methods for this course (how I studied for exams and how my notes were laid out)with me in order to produce good grades in further classes". "I basically learned how to do a research paper. For some reason through High school none of my papers had to be like the ones you do here.""I learned how to write good essays - the first test with an essay I didn't do as well as the next"

Making students aware of University resources Announcements of relevant events, such as Depression Screening Day and Eating Disorders Week, as well as pamphlets on the educational and psychological resources available at CCSU are provided. In addition, presentations by individuals in the various agencies on campus are combined with course material. The academic skills assessment given by a representative from the Educational Support Services has already been mentioned. A presentation on alcoholism is also given during the segment of the course on adolescence by an individual from the Counseling Services. Also, because the teacher can get to know individual students better, she can refer them to honors programs, leadership programs and educational support services more easily as needed and merited.

Developing connections to the larger University community. Students are given extra credit for attending three events on campus. These may be any events, but those related to psychology, such as those sponsored by the Psychology Club are particularly of interest. The more students are involved, the higher the retention rate.

Developing a connection between the course material and the rest of the students' lives. This connection is often made in the small group discussions with personal topics, such as, "What is your first memory? How old were you? Why do most people's memories begin at approximately ages 3-4 and not before?" and "What is the first thing that comes to mind about your early adolescence?" As we pass through the section on early adulthood, issues of career choice and family vs. career raise important issues for these students as they contemplate their future lives. I've had them match pictures of people their age and then the same people 25 years later to bring home the changes they can expect for themselves. In addition, students are given extra credit for bringing in articles from the popular press that relate to life-span human development. Student comments in this area include the following: In this course I've learned "how to live a healthier life", "more about adulthood so now I know what to expect", "how adults really feel when their children leave home", "to look at my life (past and present) in a different perspective. Example: intimacy vs. isolation is very relevant to my existence"

Developing active and critical thinking By examining issues they are experiencing, such as the search for identity and separation from parents in later adolescence, they can see where their own point of view is as important as anyone else's. They will hear others who may have different points of view and can compare all of these to the theories presented in class. Particularly because they are not intimidated by older students in this setting, they can try out their own ideas more comfortably in a group they have come to trust. As one student said, "This class helped me to feel comfortable to speak out in a college classroom".

An evaluation of this program was carried out by the second author of this presentation. The initial evaluation, which employed a matched comparison group, indicated that both students and faculty enjoyed their participation in the program. Students expressed a greater desire to continue their education at our institution and early retention data confirms this response. Student participants were more likely to consult with their academic advisors and to use other campus support services, both educational and psychological, which could enhance their chances for college success. We believe our program could be adapted easily to fit the needs of other institutions and that such an integrated approach stands a greater chance of acceptance and survival in our fiscally-conscious academic world.

The following is a brief summary of the findings concerning the effectiveness of the First Year Experience (FYE) program as a whole. Student surveys were given to students who had just taken an FYE course and to students who had taken the same or a similar course that semester. Between 1994 and 1996, enrollment in FYE courses has increased from 17% to 28%. At our university the FYE program will become a requirement for all freshmen as of fall semester, 1998.

When compared with freshmen not enrolled in the FYE program, FYE students were significantly more likely to get help with

-developing study and test-taking skills

-learning to use library and computer resources
-solving both personal and academic problems

Compared with other freshmen, FYE students were significantly more likely to say that they

-developed a close relationship with a faculty member
-understood how courses are interrelated
-thought professors wanted them to succeed
-believed that a small, freshman-only class helped with transition to college life
-were eager to complete their education at our university

In open-ended comments, FYE students reported that the program helped them

-feel more comfortable at our university
-become more familiar with people and processes
-develop better study, writing and time management skills
-realize that professors were very concerned with the welfare of their students.

In the words of one FYE student,

"Taking the FYE course was probably the best thing I did this semester because it was a smaller class, which made it easier to have one-to-one conversations with the professor. My FYE course taught me how to have better study habits and how to take notes. I learned more because I wasn't afraid to speak in class and voice my opinion. FYE actually made me enjoy a course I thought I would hate."